

Attempted Nesting by Blue Cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* in Alappuzha District, Kerala

Harikumar Mannar¹ & Sumesh P B²

1 Chittammethu house, Kuttemperoor.P.O, Mannar, Alappuzha(Dist) Kerala.

alp_harikumar@yahoo.com

2 Puthyaparambil house, Ezhupunna south P.O. Cherthala

sumeshf3@gmail.com

Changaram wetlands (9.47°N, 76.17°E) situated in the northernmost part of Alappuzha district. The area mostly consist of paddy fields and some of which are converted to fish/prawn farms.

For the last 5-10 years fish farming was done around the year. But since 2012, as per a special order by Honourable High court of Kerala for the implementation of ‘‘one paddy one fish’’ program the fish farms were drained in the month of March. This attracted many migratory birds like Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (Mannar 2014), of which 11 individuals were seen and also Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala*, Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea*, Eurasian Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia* and different types of egrets. Even in the month of July large number of waders are seen overwintering in the area, may be due to the easy availability of food. Spotbilled Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* nested in the area for the first time in Kerala (see elsewhere in this issue).

On 28 April 2014 during a regular birding trip SPB and Arun Lal noticed 18 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *Merops persicus* in this area (George 2014), which was the second sighting of this species after the one Uppungal, Kole wetlands(Sreenivasan,2013).

To prepare the paddyfields for cultivation, the sandy soil is dredged and heaped to form soil beds leaving behind deep channels to drain off water between the beds. On 3 May, we saw five birds excavating burrows on the sides of the soil bed in the channel. On 6 June, 14 bee-eaters were found nesting here. At the time of the first visit eight Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were busy in making burrows. in the vertical plane of sandy bed. No other bee-eater species was around. A total number of eleven burrows were seen. We stayed there for about 30 minutes at a distance of about 60 meters. Some of the burrows were unattended and there was no evidence of fresh sand expelled from these. So as to cause minimum disturbance to the nesting bee-eaters, we visited the area only twice and avoided visiting between 3 May 2014 to 6 June 2014

Unfortunately south-west monsoon broke over Kerala on 9 June 2014 The nest making continued till the first week of July. The birds were seen entering the nest, remaining there for about 5-10 minutes and

coming out. In the second week of July the birds abandoned the burrows maybe due to the infiltration of rain water. SPB dug up some of the abandoned nests after all the birds left, however no remains of egg shells was seen.

This is the first attempted nesting report of this species in South India. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters are still found near this area at the time of writing (22 July 2015) evoking the question whether this population has become resident here.

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Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *Merops persicus*

Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* from Ezhumaanthuruthu, Kuttanad Wetlands, Kottayam District

P.J. George

drpjgeorge@gmail.com

Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* is a species resident in the Western Himalayas and a winter visitor to most of north-east India. Its range extends further into northern Myanmar, Vietnam and most of east Asia upto to south-east Russia where they breed. The race *arcuata* of Western Himalayas is a short distant altitude migrant that does not disperse into the neighbouring plains of north India. The race *kuatunensis* that breeds in China winters widely in north-east India (Copete, 2011). The species has never been reported from Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011) and not even from Peninsular India.

On 30 March 2015, while birding in Ezhumaanthuruthu (9.76°N, 76.45°E) in North Kuttanad Wetlands in Kottayam district, I found a single bunting that got flushed before I could take sufficient number of photographs. However, the two photographs I obtained matched Chestnut-eared Bunting and the same was confirmed by everyone who saw these pictures and the list is uploaded in eBird (<http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S22604534>). The bird had thick conical bill, chestnut on ear coverts, strongly streaked back, white eye-ring and streaked flanks, sandy-buff underparts, supercilium, throat and legs, dark necklace and dark malar stripe, all of that matched a first winter male Chestnut-eared Bunting. Racial identification was unfortunately impossible with the quality of pictures obtained. Many observers including myself visited this site since then but could not see this bird again.

While there is little argument on its identification, its origins are unclear and much debated. March is typical for spring migration. There are no known records of this bird from the entire Peninsular India and the most likely race *arcuata* is not known to undertake long migration. It would be a wrong route for the *kuatunensis* that would have gone to China in the opposite direction. Unlike other buntings like Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* that winter in Africa which could be expected to turn up in west coast due to strong winds, this species has no such known migration routes. Hence, we need to wait for more records from the subcontinent to check if any of the races is getting established here during the winter.

The other strong likelihood is the case of a cage escapee. All buntings are caught in India and China for pet trade and it includes this species. They are sold in south India also. Possibly this was one bird that escaped from captivity and by chance I was able to locate it and photograph the same.

The third interesting possibility is the case of a return migration in *kuatunensis* subspecies. A first winter bird that was supposed to migrate to China, does a 180 degree turn and lands up in Kerala. However, reverse migration is normally more associated with autumn migration than spring migration (Thorp 2004).

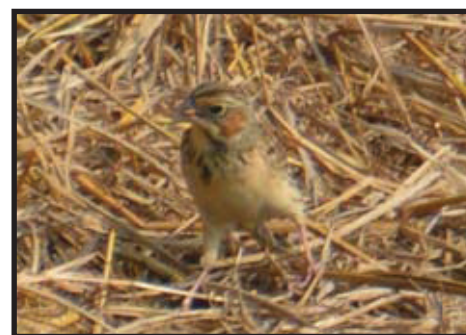
I propose this be considered for Kerala checklist under the category of “unknown origins”.

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Chestnut-eared Bunting
(*Emberiza fucata*).

A Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* from Puthankadapuram, Chavakkad, Thrissur District

P PSreenivasan

B-27, Guruvayur Dewasom Quarters, Puthanpally (PO), Tamarayur, Thrissur, Kerala, India.

sreenivasangvr@gmail.com

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* is considered a summer visitor to Vengurla Rocks (off southern Maharashtra), Rameswaram Island and islets off western and eastern Sri Lanka, Chagos and Andamans (breeding off islets of south Andamans). It is frequently seen and perhaps breeds in Maldives while the winter range of these regional birds is unknown (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This species has not been seen from Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2010) until recently when a few birds were photographed off Nileshwaram coast, Kasaragod district (Karuthedathu & Raju 2014).



Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*

On 21 July 2015, a single pale tern with pinkish underparts was photographed from Puthankadapuram beach near Chavakkad sitting next to a few Common Terns *Sterna hirundo* and a single Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*. The birds later took to flight with other Crested Terns *Thalasseus sp.* in the flock and more images were taken. Identification of this species is based on much paler upper parts (compared to Common Terns), pinkish hue to underparts, reduced amount of black on primaries and pure white long outer tail feathers. Orangish legs and slightly longer beak compared to Common Terns is also visible. The bird is nearly in breeding plumage but its beak is still black, which will be red in breeding plumage. This species might be a rare visitor to our shores and liable to be overlooked amongst the mixed tern flocks while in winter plumage but may be easier to pick in summer plumage.

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A Sooty Gull *Ichthyiaetus hemprichii* from Udupi District, Karnataka

Swethadri Doraiswamy

Flat no 304, Ramaleela Apartments, Vajapeyam Gardens, Ashoknagar, Bangalore 560050
swethadri987@gmail.com

Sooty Gull *Ichthyiaetus hemprichii* is a resident of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Eden in Persian Gulf, a non-breeding resident in the Gulf of Oman, right up to the shorelines of northern Kenya in the southwest and Pakistan in the east. It is a rare vagrant to India with only five confirmed records till date (Praveen *et al.*, 2014). This is a report of the bird seen at the Karnataka coast, which is the first for the state.

During a recent birding trip for studying and photographing the coastal birds near Kodi (13.31°N, 74.87°E), Udupi district, I noticed a dark looking Gull and casually photographed it. When the photograph was shared with others, this was identified as an adult Sooty Gull, later confirmed by many bird-watchers. Identification was rather straight forward: there are no dark-hooded, dark-backed Gulls that are found in the Indian coasts and the only confusion species, the White-eyed Gull *Ichthyiaetus leucophthalmus* has a much longer beak. Till date, there are no photographs of this gull from the field for the whole of the country. It has been recorded thrice from Maharashtra and once from Goa and Tamil Nadu. The



Sooty Gull *Ichthyiaetus hemprichii*

record from West Bengal is treated as unconfirmed (Praveen *et al.* 2014).

Word got around and several dailies carried this news item and I feel honored and privileged to have had this rare opportunity with a rarity.

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Spot-billed Pelicans breeding in Changaram Wetlands

Vaisakh George

Kurumanchery house, Ezhupunna south PO, Cherthala, Alappuzha

vaisakhgeorge@gmail.com

Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* is a widespread resident in south India (Birdlife International 2015) but a straggler to Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011). From south-central Kerala, the only published record was from Vembanad backwaters (Sreekumar 2002). This species was spotted from Changaram Wetlands (9.47°N, 76.17°E) on 28 March 2014 by Birders Ezhupunna Club member Renju and P.B. Sumesh confirmed the sighting through photographs. Discussions with bird-watchers revealed that Deepu Sasi had also seen it on June 2013 from Changaram and Basil Peter on November 2013 from Kandakadavu. Since the date of first observation, up to 13 Spot-billed Pelicans have been seen mainly between Kumbalangi in the north till Andhakaranazhi in the south. This species is distinctive: the spots on upper mandible visible at close range, lack of bright colours on the pouch of the lower mandible and the grey plumage are diagnostic.

A nest were observed on 5 May 2014 on top of a coconut tree at Kandakadavu, a place that lies between Ezhupunna and Kumbalangi by Jinu Muralidaran, Sumesh P B, Arun, Renju, Emmanuel and myself. We saw a pair of adult birds with only few nesting materials in the same tree. The nesting tree was inaccessible while the nest itself was well covered among the adjoining vegetation. From our observations, it appeared that the nest had two chicks.

On a later date, two chicks, roughly two week old, that fell off the tree was brought to us by Mr. Sreekumar who resides in that area (about 4.5km from the nest site). According to him, he found them below the

same coconut tree. The chicks were fed by him with about 750-1000g of fish daily. He continued to feed the chicks despite difficulties in obtaining fresh catch, supplemented by fish bought from the market. By about a month the fledglings attempted to fly. Unfortunately, on 20 June, one of the young pelicans was electrocuted while on an attempted sortie. The other pelican juvenile was handed over to the Kerala Forest Department on 23 June 2014 and released near the nest site after two days. Nobody has reported this sub-adult bird since then.

Spot-billed Pelican was classified by IUCN as Vulnerable but recently got down-listed to Near-threatened. The Indian population is thought to exceed to 5000 birds in the south owing to increases resulting from improved protection of these species. In southern India there are 21 known breeding colonies in states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Birdlife International 2015); the present one is the first breeding report for Kerala.

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Spot-billed Pelican
Pelecanus philippensis

Breeding of Barred Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator* at Cheemani, Kasaragod District, Kerala, India.

Sasidharan Manekkara* and Anoopkumar Podavoor

*Manasasaras, P.O. Panniyannore, Thalassery, Kerala. 670671

Barred Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator* is a typical little quail, distributed throughout the India up to above 2500 m (Ali, 2005). K K Neelakantan (1994) suspected that it may occur in Palakkad and Malappuram districts as he had heard its typical drumming call in some places in these districts. Sashikumar *et al.* (2011) state of some sightings in Periyar Tiger Reserve and Walayar in the 1990s and suggest that this species may have been very much overlooked. Recently (April 2014), it has been

reported from M E S Medical College campus, Perinthalmanna, Malappuram district as a resident species (Jebin Abraham, Birdwatchers of Kerala Facebook group). There are no breeding records of this species from Kerala.

On 3 June 2015 I got a message from Anoopkumar Podavoor, a birdwatcher known to me, that a quail-like bird with four chicks has been sighted near Cheemeni, Kasaragod district, north Kerala. From his description, I guessed that it may be a buttonquail, a rare bird species of Kerala. I told him of the importance of the sighting and asked to watch its movements. Without wasting much time I rushed the spot. Before that Anoop had taken some good photographs of the bird which undoubtedly showed that it was Barred Buttonquail.

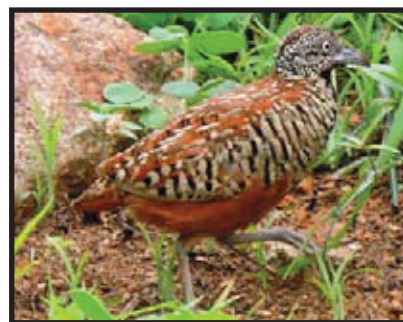
At 9:30 in the morning, while he was passing through a road on a motorbike, Anoopkumar noticed a bird trying to cross the road. Immediately, he stopped the bike and began to watch it. Its particular call and behavior aroused his curiosity and further observation revealed four chicks lying on ground near a bush. When I reached the place the chicks were still at same place. The chicks were smaller than those of a village hen. They had fluffy body with light brown feathers streaked dark brown and white. The chicks were lying motionless and the camouflaged coloration aided them to stay undetected even in that open area.

Immediately we hid in the thick bush nearby, from where we could watch the chicks clearly. More than two hours went by and but there were no signs of the parent birds; occasionally some faint drumming call from far was heard. Then, a parent bird appeared in the scene and carefully approached the chicks. The black throat and centre of breast showed that it was a female. It produced a peculiar call and suddenly the chicks became active and slowly began to move towards the parent. The male also soon joined the group. All the six birds, mother, father and four chicks slowly walked towards a grassy area.

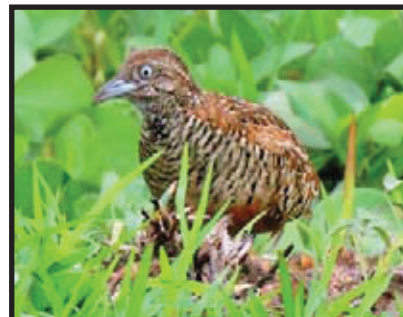
This is the first record of this species breeding in Kerala.

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Barred buttonquail female



Barred buttonquail male